

WEBSTER -MAN'S MAN

Peter B. Kyne

Author of "Cappy Ricks," "The Valley of the Giants," Etc.

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DON RICARDO RUEY.

John Stuart Webster, mining engineer, boards a train in Death Valley, California, on his way back to civilization after cleaning up \$100,000. He looks like a hobo. Then he rescues a distressed lady, who makes his heart flop over. He eliminates the offending man. She is Dolores Ruey. In Denver he is offered a \$5,000-a-year job by a capitalist friend, Edward J. Jerome. He receives a delayed letter from his own particular pal, Billy Geary, asking him to finance a gold-mining proposition in Central America and go fifty-fifty with him on the profits. So he starts for Sobrante. Jerome goes with John to the depot. They meet the distressed lady on her way to the same train. John tells Jerome the whole story. Jerome secretly sees the girl, offering her \$10,000 if she induces John to take his job inside of ninety days. The girl accepts. The scene now shifts to Buenaventura, Sobrante, where Geary has existed for two months on credit extended by Mother Jenks, keeper of a hotel and dramsop. Dolores cables Henrietta Wilkins (Mother Jenks) that she is on her way to visit her. Mother Jenks has been educating Dolores, who is the daughter of former President Ruey of Sobrante, deposed and executed by President Sarros. Mother Jenks doesn't want Dolores to find out she is no longer respectable. So Billy meets the steamer and tries to turn the girl back. But Dolores lands and salutes Mother Jenks as "Mother." Billy promptly falls in love with Dolores. Webster in New Orleans secures a stateroom on La Estrella by buying a ticket for a mythical valet. "Andrew Bowers." In New Orleans Webster saves a young man from assassination. On the steamer he finds the mythical valet in his stateroom. He accepts "Bowers" on trust, without learning his identity. At Buenaventura he assists the "valet" to land. He finds Billy in love with Dolores, and like the good scout he is bids farewell to his romance. Dolores astonishes him. Don Juan Cafetero tells him of a plot to kill him. Billy leaves on business and Webster falls more deeply in love.

CHAPTER X—Continued.

Once free of the door, Webster waited just inside the lobby for the Sobrantean to conclude his precipitate entrance. When he did, Webster looked him over with mild curiosity and bowed with great condescension. "Did any gentleman ever tell the senator that he is an ill-mannered monkey?" he queried coolly in excellent Spanish. "If not, I desire to give the senator that information, and to tell him that his size alone prevents me from giving him a nice little spanking."

"Pig!" the rude one answered hotly. His olive features paled with anger, he trembled with emotion and seemed undecided what to do—seeing which Webster grinned at him tantalizingly. That decided him. No Latin-American, with the exaggerated ego of his race, can bear even a suspicion of ridicule. The officer walked fiercely toward Webster and swung his arm toward the latter's face in an effort to land a slap that was "meant."

Webster merely threw back his head and avoided the blow; his long left arm shot out and beat down the



Soused Him in the Fountain.

Sobrantean's guard; then Webster's right hand closed around the officer's collar. "Come to me thou insolent little one," he crooned, and jerked his assailant toward him, gathered him up in his arms, carried him kicking and screaming with futile rage, out into the patio and soused him in the fountain.

your hot head, I trust," he admonished his unhappy victim, and returned to the hotel. At the desk he paused.

"Who was that person I just bathed?" he inquired of the excited clerk. "Ah, senior, you shall not long be kept in ignorance," that functionary informed him. "That is the terrible Captain Benavides—"

"Do you know, I had a notion it was he?" Webster replied ruminatively. "Well, I suppose I'm in for a duel now," he added to himself as he climbed the stairs to his room. "I think that will be most interesting."

John Stuart Webster changed into dry clothing and descended to the dining-room. Miss Ruey was already seated at her table and motioned him to the seat opposite her, and as he sat down with a contented little sigh, she gazed at him with a newer and more alert interest.

"I hear you've been having adventures again," she challenged. "The news is all over the hotel. I heard it from the head waiter."

"Coffee and pistols for two at daylight," he answered cheerily. "By the way, I have made my will, just to be on the safe side. Will you be good enough to take charge of it until after the funeral? You can turn it over to Billy then."

She fell readily into the bantering spirit with which he treated this serious subject. Indeed, it was quite impossible to do otherwise, for John Stuart Webster's personality radiated such a feeling of security, of absolute, unbounded confidence in the future and disdain for whatever of good fortune or ill the future might entail, that Dolores found it impossible not to assimilate his mood.

At seven-thirty, after a delightful dinner, the memory of which Mr. Webster was certain would linger under his foretop long after every other memory had departed, he escorted her to the open carriage he had ordered, and for two hours they circled the Malcon with the elite of Buenaventura, listening to the music of the band, and, during the brief intermissions, to the sound of the waves lapping the beach at the foot of the broad driveway.

"This," said John Stuart Webster, as he said goodnight to Dolores in the lobby, "is the end of a perfect day."

It wasn't for at that precise moment a servant handed him a card, and indicated a young man seated in an adjacent lounging-chair, at the same time volunteering the information that the visitor had been awaiting Senior Webster's return for the past hour.

Webster glanced at the card and strode over to the young man. "I am Mr. Webster, sir," he announced civilly in Spanish. "And you are Lieutenant Arredondo?"

The visitor rose, bowed low and indicated he was that gentleman. "I have called, Mr. Webster," he stated in most excellent English, "in the interest of my friend and comrade, Captain Benavides."

"Ah, yes! The fresh little rooster I ducked in the fountain this evening. Well, what does the little squirt want now? Another ducking?"

Arredondo flushed angrily but remembered the dignity of his mission and controlled his temper. "Captain Benavides has asked me to express to you the hope that you, being doubtless a man of honor—"

"Stop right there, Lieutenant. There is no doubt about it. I am a man of honor, and unless you are anxious to be ducked in the fountain, you will be more careful in your choice of words. Now then: You are about to say that, being a man of honor—"

"You would accord my friend the satisfaction which one gentleman never fails to accord another."

"That lets me out, amigo," Webster laughed. "Benavides isn't a gentleman. He's a cutthroat, a murdering little black-and-tan hound. Do I understand he wants me to fight a duel with him?"

Lieutenant Arredondo could not trust himself to speak, and so he bowed profoundly.

"Very well, then, Lieutenant," Webster agreed. "I'll fight him."

"Tomorrow morning at five o'clock."

"Five minutes from now if you say so."

"Captain Benavides will be grateful for your willing spirit, at least," the second replied bitterly. "You realize, of course, Mr. Webster, that as the challenged party, the choice of weapons rests with you."

"Certainly. I wouldn't have risked a duel if the choice lay with the other fellow. With your permission, my dear sir, we'll fight with Mauser rifles at a thousand yards, for the reason that I never knew a Greaser that could hit the broad side of a brewery at any range over two hundred and fifty yards." Webster chuckled fiendishly.

Lieutenant Arredondo bit his lips in anger and vexation. "I cannot agree to such an extraordinary duel," he complained. "It is the custom in

Sobrante for gentlemen to fight with rapiers."

"Oh, dry up, you sneaking murderer," Webster exploded. "There isn't going to be any duel except on my terms—so you might as well take a straight tip from headquarters and stick to plain assassination. You and Benavides have been sent out by your superior to kill me—you got your orders this very afternoon at the entrance to the government palace—and I'm just not going to be killed. Beat it, boy, while the going is good." He pointed toward the hotel door. "Out, you blackguard!" he roared. "Vaya!"

Lieutenant Arredondo rose and with dignified mien started for the door. Webster followed, and as his visitor reached the portal, a tremendous kick, well placed, lifted him down to the sidewalk. Shrieking curses, he fled into the night; and John Stuart Webster, with a satisfied feeling that something accomplished had earned a night's repose, retired to his room in mauve silk pajamas, and slept the sleep of a healthy, conscience-free man.

At about the same hour Neddy Jerome, playing solitaire in the Engineers' club in Denver, was the recipient of a cablegram which read:

"If W. cables accepting reply rejecting account job filled otherwise beans spilled. Implicit obedience spells victory."

"Henrietta."

Neddy Jerome wiped his spectacles, adjusted them on his nose and read this amazing message once more. "Jumped-up Jehosophat!" he murmured. "If she hasn't followed that madcap Webster clear to Buenaventura! If she isn't out in earnest to earn her fee, I'm an orang-outang! By thunder, that's a smart woman. All right! I'll be implicitly obedient."

Two hours later Neddy Jerome received another cablegram. It was from John Stuart Webster and read as follows:

"Hold job ninety days at latest may be back before. If satisfactory cable."

Again Mr. Jerome had recourse to the most powerful expletive at his command. "Henrietta knew he was going to cable and beat the old sour-dough to it," he soliloquized. He was wrapped in profound admiration of her cunning for as much as five minutes; then he indited this reply to his victim:

"Time, tide and good jobs wait for no man. Sorry. Job already filled by better man."

When John Stuart Webster received that cablegram the following morning, he cursed bitterly—not because he had lost the best job that had ever been offered him, but because he had lost through playing a good hand poorly. He hated himself for his idleness.

CHAPTER XI.

For fully an hour after retiring John Stuart Webster slept the deep, untroubled sleep of a healthy unwarmed man; then one of the many species of "jigger" which flourish just north and south of the equator crawled into bed with him and promptly proceeded to establish its commissary on the inner flank of the Websterian thigh, where the skin is thin and the blood close to the surface. As a consequence, Mr. Webster awoke suddenly, obliterated the intruder and got out of bed for the purpose of anointing the injured spot with alcohol—which being done, an active search of the bed resulted in the discovery of three more jiggers and the envelopment of John Stuart Webster's soul in the fogs of apprehension.

"This an evil land, filled with trouble," he mused as he lighted a cigarette. "I wish Bill were here to advise me. He ought to be able to straighten this deal out and assure the higher-ups that I'm not butting in on their political affairs. But Bill's up-country and here I am under surveillance and unable to leave the hotel to talk it over with Andrew Bowers, the only other white expert I know of in town. And by the way, they're after Andrew, too! I wonder what for."

He smoked two cigarettes, the while he pondered the various visible aspects of this dark mess in which he found himself floundering. And finally he arrived at a decision. "These chaps aren't thorough," Webster decided. "They'll see me safely to bed and pick me up again in the morning—so I'll take a chance that the coast is clear, slip out now and talk it over with Andrew."

He looked at his watch—eleven-thirty. Hurriedly he dressed, strapped on his automatic pistol, dragged his bed noisily to the open window and tied to the bed-leg the rope he used to lash his trunk; then he lowered himself out the window. The length of rope permitted him to descend within a few feet of the ground.

Webster made his way to the street unnoticed and ten minutes later appeared before the entrance of El Buen Amigo just as Mother Jenks was barring it for the night.

"I am Mr. Webster," he announced. "—Mr. Geary's friend from the United States."

Mother Jenks, having heard of him, was of course profoundly flustered to meet this toff who so carelessly wired his down-and-out friends pesos oro in lots of a thousand. Cordially she invited him within to stow a peg of her best, which invitation Mr. Webster promptly accepted.

"To your beautiful eyes," Webster toasted her. "And now would you mind leading me to the quarters of Billy's friend Mr. Bowers?"

She shuffled away, to return presently with the news that Mr. Bowers was in his room and would be delighted to receive Mr. Webster. Mother Jenks led Webster to the door

knocked, announced him and discreetly withdrew.

"My dear Webster!" cried Andrew Bowers enthusiastically, and he drew his late fellow-passenger into the room. Webster observed that Andrew was not alone. "I want to see you privately," he said. "Didn't know you had company, or I wouldn't have intruded."

"Well, I knew I had company, didn't I? Come in, you crazy fellow, and meet some good friends of mine who are very anxious to meet you." He turned to a tall, handsome, scholarly looking man of about forty, whose features, dress and manner of wearing his whiskers proclaimed him a personage. "Dr. Eliseo Pacheco, I have the honor to present Mr. John S. Webster, the American gentleman of whom you have heard me speak."

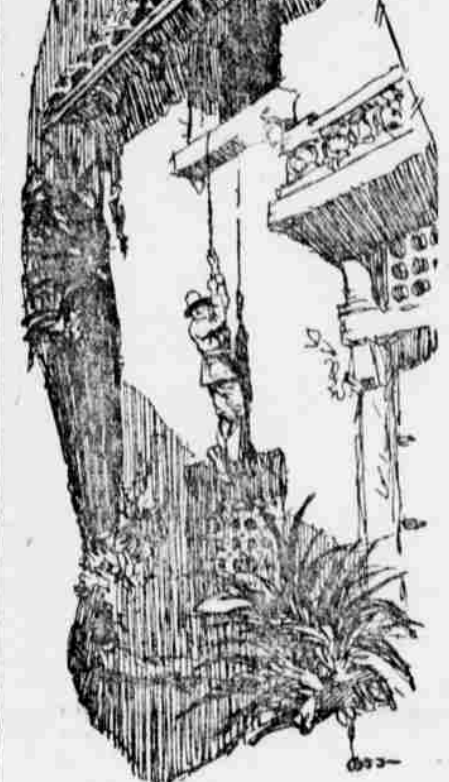
Doctor Pacheco promptly leaped to his feet and bowed with ostentatious reverence then suddenly, with Latin impulsiveness, he advanced upon Webster, swept aside the latter's outstretched hand, clasped John Stuart Webster in fraternal embrace, and to the old sour-dough's inexpressible horror, kissed him upon the right cheek—after which he backed off, bowed once more, and said in Spanish:

"Sir, my life is yours."

"It is well he gave it to you before you took it," Andrew said in English, and he laughed, noting Webster's confusion. "And this gentleman is Colonel Pablo Caraveo."

"Thunder, I'm in for it again," Webster thought—and he was, for the amiable colonel embraced Webster and kissed his left cheek before turning to Andrew.

"You will convey to our guest, in English, Don Ricardo, assurances of



He Lowered Himself Out of the Window.

my profound happiness in meeting him," he said in Spanish. "The Colonel says you're all to the mustard," Andrew at once interpreted merrily.

"Rather a liberal translation," Webster retorted in Spanish, whereat Colonel Caraveo sprang up and clapped his hands in delight.

"Your happiness, my dear Colonel," Webster continued, "is extravagant grief compared with my delight in meeting a Sobrantean gentleman who has no desire to skewer me." He turned to Andrew. "While introductions are in order, old son, suppose you complete the job and introduce yourself. I'm always suspicious of a man with an alias."

"Then behold the death of that impudent fellow Andrew Bowers, late valet de chambre to this eminent mining engineer and prince of gentlemen, Mr. John Stuart Webster. Doctor Pacheco, will you be good enough to perform the operation?"

"This gentleman," said the doctor, laying his hand on Andrew's shoulder, "is Don Ricardo Ruiz Ruey, a gentleman, a patriot, and the future president of our unhappy country."

Webster put his hands on the young man's shoulders. "Ricardo, my son," he asked earnestly, "do you think you could give me some little hint of the approximate date on which you will assume office? By the nine gods of war, I never wanted a friend at court so badly as I want one tonight."

Webster sat down and helped himself from a box of cigars he found on Ricardo's bureau. "I feel I am among friends at last," he announced between preliminary puffs. "So listen while I spin a strange tale. I've been the picture of bad luck ever since I started for this infernal—this wonderful country of yours. In New Orleans I took a Sunday morning stroll in Jackson square and came across two men trying to knife another. In the interest of common decency I interfered and won a sweeping victory, but to my amazement the prospective corpse took to his heels and advised me to do the same."

Ricardo Ruey sprang for John Stuart Webster. "By George," he said in English. "I'm going to hug you, too. I really ought to kiss you, because I'm that man you saved from assassination, but—too long in the U. S. A., I suppose; I've lost the customs of my country."

"Get out," yelled Webster, fending him off. "By the way, Ricardo—I'm going to call you Rick for short—do you happen to have any relatives in this country?"

"Yes, a number of second and third cousins."

"Coming down on the steamer, I didn't like to appear curious, but all

the time I wanted to ask you one question."

"Ask it now."

"Are you a Sobrantean?"

"I was born in this country and raised here until I was fourteen."

"But you're—why, hang it, You're not a Latin?"

"No, I'm a mixture, with Latin predominating. My forebears were pure Castilians from Madrid, and crossed the Western ocean in caravels. It's been a matter of pride with the house of Ruey to keep the blood pure, but despite all precautions, the family tree has been grafted once with a Scotch thistle, twice with the lily of France, and once with the shamrock of Ireland. My mother was an Irish woman."

"You alibi yourself perfectly, Ricardo, and my curiosity is appeased. Permit me to continue my tale," he added in Spanish, and forthwith he related with humorous detail his adventure at the gangplank of the steamer that had borne him and Ricardo Ruey south.

Ricardo interrupted him. "We know all about that, friend Webster, and we knew the two delightful gentlemen had been told off to get you—unofficially. The Sobrantean revolutionary junta has headquarters in New Orleans. It is composed of political exiles, for Sarros, the present dictator of Sobrante, rules with an iron hand, and has a cute little habit of railroading his enemies to the cemetery via the treason charge and the firing squad. He killed my father, who was the best president this benighted country ever had, and I consider it my Christian duty to avenge my father and a patriotic duty to take up the task he left unfinished—the task of making over my country."

"In Sobrante, as in most of the countries in Central America, there are two distinct classes of people—the aristocrats and peons—and the aristocrat fattens on the peon, as he has had a habit of doing since Adam. We haven't any middle class to stand as a buffer between the two—which makes it a sad proposition. My father was an idealist and a dreamer and he dreamed of reform in government and a solution of the agrarian problem which confronts all Latin-America. He trusted one Pablo Sarros, an educated peon, who had commanded the government forces under the regime my father overthrew. My tender-hearted parent discovered that Sarros was plotting to overthrow him; but instead of having him shot, he merely removed him from command. Sarros gathered a handful of bandits, joined the old government forces my father had conquered, hired a couple dozen Yankee artillerymen and—he won out. My father was captured and executed; the palace was burned, and my sister perished in the flames. I'm here to pay off the score."

"A worthy ambition! So you organized the revolutionary junta in New Orleans, eh?"

Ricardo nodded. "Word of it reached Sarros, and he sent his brother Raoul, chief of the intelligence bureau, to investigate and report. As fast as he reported, Colonel Caraveo reported to me. My father's son possesses a name to conjure with. Consequently it was to the interest of the Sarros administration that I be eliminated. They watched every boat; hence my scheme for eluding their vigilance—which, thanks to you, worked like a charm."

"But," Webster complained, "I'm not sitting in the game at all, and yet I'm caught between the upper and nether millstones."

"That is easy to explain. You interfered that morning in Jackson square; then Raoul Sarros met you going aboard the steamer for Buenaventura, and you manhandled him, and naturally, putting two and two together, he has concluded that you are not only his personal enemy but also a friend and protector of mine and consequently an enemy of the state."

"And as a consequence I'm marked for slaughter?"

"It would be well, my friend," Doctor Pacheco suggested, "to return to the United States until after Ricardo and his friends have eliminated your Nemesis."

"How soon will that happy event transpire?"

"In about sixty days we hope to be ready to strike, Mr. Webster."

Colonel Caraveo cleared his throat. "I understand from Ricardo that you and another American are interested in a mining concession, Mr. Webster."

Webster nodded.

"Is this a concession from a private landholder or did your friend secure it from the Sarros government?"

"From the government. We pay ten per cent. royalty, on a ninety-nine-year lease, and that's all I know about it. I have never seen the property, and my object in coming was to examine it and, if satisfied, finance the project."

"If you will return to your hotel, my dear sir," Colonel Caraveo suggested, "and remain there until noon tomorrow, I feel confident I can guarantee you immunity from attack thereafter. I have a plan to influence my associates in the intelligence office."

"Bully for you, Colonel. Give me sixty days in which to operate, and I'll have finished my job in Sobrante and gotten out of it before that gang of cutthroats wakes up to the fact that I'm gone. I thank you, sir."

"The least we can do, since you have saved Ricardo's life and rendered our cause a great service, is to save your life," Colonel Caraveo replied.

"Pull your hardware, you pretty pair of polecats!"

(TO BE CONTINUED)

One Instance.
"The office should seek the man."
"It does in the case of the vice president."

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